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C O N F I D E N T I A L LAGOS 000372

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: MILITANT LEADER "ATEKE TOM" ACCEPTS  
AMNESTY

REF: LAGOS 371 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: A/Consul General Richard Walsh, Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (U) Militant leader "Ateke Tom" accepted amnesty on October 1 during a televised ceremony at the Presidential Villa in Abuja, three days before the amnesty is scheduled to expire. President Yar'Adua, noting the surrender came on Nigerian National Day, called the militant's surrender "the best anniversary gift ever." Ateke Tom, leader of the Niger Delta Vigilante Movement based in Rivers State, expressed concern about his security, but reportedly delivered 2,000 completed amnesty applications from his followers.

¶2. (C) Nigerian political activist Daniel Richard of the African Coalition for Transparent Elections, who visited the Niger Delta two years earlier to compile the names of militants at the request of then Defense Minister (and current Secretary to the Government of the Federation) Yayale Ahmed, told PolMilOff on October 2 that virtually none of the names submitted by Ateke Tom, or other militants, for amnesty matched those on his list, and suggested that the list was simply a fraudulent effort to augment GON payouts. Separately, the Center for Environment, Human Rights and Development Coordinator, Patrick Naagbanton, predicted to us that militant leader Tompolo would be forced to surrender by the amnesty deadline due to intense pressure from within his group to do so.

COMMENT

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¶3. (C) Although Ateke Tom's forces are believed to have formed tactical alliances for specific operations with elements of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Ateke himself has never claimed to be part of MEND. Many activists view him as "purely criminal" and allege that he is heavily involved in illegal oil bunkering and arms trafficking from his base in Okrika, Rivers State. Ateke Tom served as chief "security officer" to the former Rivers State Governor Peter Odili when he used his cult group "the Icelanders" to help rig the 2003 elections. Although initially allied to the Ijaw Youth Council under Dokubo Asari, Ateke and Asari soon became rivals. He also fought bloody battles with the Sobomo George and his group "the Outlaws" for control of parts of Rivers State.

¶4. (C) Despite his exceptionally shady past, Ateke Tom's acceptance of surrender is a coup for the GON's amnesty

program and intensifies the political pressure on militant giant Tompolo to follow suit. Left unanswered is whether amnesty is a means to an end or simply the end. There are no signs that the GON has a second act in mind after the curtain comes down on the amnesty period, which suggests that very little would actually change in the Delta. One early indicator could be whether "amnesty" materially affects Ateke Tom's illegal oil and arms businesses. END COMMENT.

15. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Abuja.  
WALSH